DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 513 SP 025 982

AUTHOR	Brandt, Ron, Ed.; Dronka, Pamela, Ed.
TITLE	Incentives for Excellence in America's Schools. A Report from the ASCD Task Force on Merit Pay and Career Ladders.
INSTITUTION	Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Va.
REPORT NO	ISBN-0-87120-128-3
PUB DATE	85
NOTE	25p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 225 N. Washington St., Alexandria, VA 22314 ($2.50).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Career Ladders; *Decision Making; Educational Improvement; Educational Quality; Incentives; *Merit Pay; *Public Opinion; Teacher Evaluation; Teacher Salaries; *Teaching (Occupation)
IDENTIFIERS	Excellence in Education

ABSTRACT

The current debate about merit pay and career ladders requires that educators, board members, and the general public examine more closely the assumptions that are made about schools and the teachers in them. In this monograph, the complex issues surrounding the question of merit pay and career ladders are addressed. Six common perceptions on the part of the public on the subject of teachers, teaching, and compensation are discussed. A brief history of merit pay and career ladders illustrates the political and administrative problems involved. It is suggested that in responding to such initiatives and before designing merit pay and career ladder programs, the political, economic, and cultural contexts of particular states or school systems must be considered. It is recommended that any decision to implement a pay incentive program should be an informed choice that recognizes all pertinent local variables and clearly comprehends available options. (JD)

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INCENTIVES FOR EXCELLENCE IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

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A Report from The ASCD Task Force on Merit Pay and Career Ladders of The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

INCENTIVES FOR EXCELLENCE IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

A Report from The ASCD Task Force on Merit Pay and Career Ladders

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Editing: Ron Brandt, Executive Editor
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Price: $2.50
ASCD Stock Number: 611-84356
ISBN: 0-87120-128-3
Library of Congress
Card Catalog Number: 85-070019

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This report does not necessarily reflect the official positions of the organizations that task force members represented.

INCENTIVES FOR EXCELLENCE IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

We are in the midst of an unprecedented national debate about whether merit pay and its close relative, career ladders, should rightfully be considered strategies that promote school improvement. While it might have been convenient to wait until time has passed, affording us complete knowledge and perfect perspective, we are faced with the reality that many states are now implementing or planning forms of merit pay. Educators, as willing or unwilling participants in these plans, cannot afford the luxury of passive observation. Thus ASCD has chosen to take an informed position, drawing such conclusions as can be agreed upon by members of a broadly representative task force. Members included professors, supervisors, a former superintendent, representatives from the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, and educators from three states (North Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida) with current models of merit pay and/or career ladders that are of intense national interest.

The Purpose of this Report

We hope that this discussion will assist ASCD members in becoming an informed part of the national debate about merit pay and career ladders and help them better understand the issues and assumptions that underlie contemporary rhetoric on the subject. Another very important goal is to place the issue of merit pay in the broader context of human resource development because comprehensive changes that promote effective management of schools and professional growth of teachers will prove more likely to positively influence teaching performance than any merit pay programs that might succeed.

If the question is, "How can we optimize the productive capacity of the professional staff in our school district?" merit pay is clearly not the whole answer. Not even the most enthusiastic merit pay advocate would contend that merit pay alone is a sufficient human resource development response by schools.

We do not propose to argue the perceived faults or advantages of individual merit pay plans or models. A too-likely result would be an

ideological stalemate. Proponents would be likely to square off on one side; they would say that the public can't afford to pay *all* teachers higher salaries, but they do appear to approve paying *some* extremely productive teachers more. Merit pay supporters would confidently propose plans to identify and reward such teachers. Opponents would logically react by insisting that tools to identify deserving teachers are extremely untrustworthy; they would dismiss as futile any efforts to fairly institute merit pay (Johnson, 1984).

These two polar viewpoints rest on assumptions that may not even be true. The public *may* be willing to pay all teachers a decent salary, and many educators are convinced that it *is* possible to identify outstanding teachers, at least on some criteria.

Liberating our thoughts from entrenched positions is essential if there is to be sensible discussion of issues. Merit pay and career ladders have aroused more emotion than carefully reasoned analysis. The charged nature of the issue has made it impossible to test varying teacher compensation programs except by the application of political muscle, a situation that creates a fertile climate for the growth of a powerful counter force; that in turn leads to sharply adversarial activity instead of cooperative effort. The task force has made a conscious effort to avoid such polarization and reiteration of doctrinaire positions in probing the many complex issues related to the education profession's compensation structure.

Widely Accepted Views of the Problem

Ordinarily, an important issue related to education yields two versions of the problem: the issue as perceived by the public and the issue as it appears to professional educators, who, as people involved with the problem, are acutely aware of its dynamics. The public's perception of merit pay and career ladders, which is naturally reflected in their elected representatives, is that pay incentives somehow present a reasonable solution to severe difficulties in education.

Henry Steele Commager said that 19th century Americans wanted education to "be practical and pay dividends." They still do. A second point of public consensus is the widely-held belief that schools can and

should be better. Reports charging that test scores have declined, standards have loosened, and discipline has eroded have undermined the public's confidence in its schools. A common line of reasoning that emerges from this dissatisfaction is that excellence — or the lack of it — is positively correlated with the quality — or lack of it — in the teaching force.

Those who think this way conclude that if schools and teachers are to improve, accountability must be strengthened. The controversy among legislators, school board officials, and educators over why achieving accountability is difficult perplexes the public because their conventional wisdom suggests that a simple, straightforward solution is obvious. This conclusion is based on a series of perceptions and assumptions often so tightly intertwined that is is hard to pull them apart. Nevertheless, we will try.

Public Perception No. 1: Teaching is an unsophisticated and relatively simple job.

Perhaps because a good many people outside of schools teach skills to other people, teaching per se is not perceived by the average citizen as very complex. They may acknowledge that it is difficult, but do not see it as very complicated. Many of those to whom teaching appears simple would advocate that certification requirements be waived and that schools of education, at least those heavily involved in teacher training, be diminished or abolished.

We consider teaching a complex act and find that research on actual teachers' responsibilities indicates that the classroom is clearly the domain of a professional.

Public Perception No. 2: Since teaching is simple, evaluation of teaching must be simple.

Acceptance of the proposition that teaching is simple leads temptingly to a conclusion that evaluation of teaching performance is and ought to be equally simple. Concerns about evaluation — its instruments, procedures, and reliability — strike many people as a feeble excuse by educators for not doing their jobs. Common wisdom assures them that the formal evaluation of teachers cannot be difficult because everyone knows, at least informally, which teachers are the ablest. We often hear, "Everybody *knows* who the good teachers are. Why don't they just

reward them?" The public is inclined to suspect that issues raised about evaluation are the spurious defenses of strong unions and/or weak administrators.

The ASCD task force agrees that an array of methodological problems render teacher evaluation difficult, costly, and at least somewhat imprecise. For example, using students' standardized test scores to evaluate teachers is fraught with many problems; such tests tend to overestimate pupil growth, and since they are nationally devised, they may measure only a small part of the local curriculum that teachers were hired by districts to teach. Evaluation has often rightly been criticized, too, for its frequent reliance on rating scales that cannot accurately yield high-inference judgments about teaching performance, or measure with valid certainty, or resist the "halo effect" that occurs when a high rating carries over to judgments on other variables (Soar, Medley, and Coker, 1983).

However, while we concede that evaluation remains an underconceptualized and underdeveloped activity, we believe that it *is* possible to get some reasonable measures of classroom performance.

Public Perception No. 3: The public schools are staffed by lazy (and/or incompetent) teachers.

In some quarters the perception exists that public school teachers are unmotivated or unable to do their jobs. Resisting the temptation to shout back, "No, they're not!" we simply report that we find no evidence to support such an allegation.

Public Perception No. 4: Money will motivate highly qualified people to select teaching and persuade them to stay in teaching once there.

The insistence that a little more money will lure those who might not otherwise consider teaching and will keep good teachers in the ranks suggests an interesting paradox. Few people would want someone to select teaching solely for money. Teaching, like the ministry, has traditionally been (at least in part) a calling. Parents might rightly be suspicious of a teacher who was enticed into the job solely by a slightly larger paycheck.

Yet the same people who want their children to have teachers who are dedicated to their profession will reason that effective teachers should be paid a bit more money so that they will not leave teaching. Would anyone

endorse a teacher, though, whose motive for continued outstanding performance is $1500 a year? Is that the value of a superior teacher's contribution?

Many teachers respond angrily at the meager amounts that are proposed as rewards to motivate them, and rightly so. Such proposals imply that teachers are motivated chiefly by money and manipulated easily by the insubstantial. Further, those who insist that money will influence teacher performance assume that money is causative of performance. In our opinion this relationship has not been firmly established.

Public Perception No. 5: The teaching profession cannot attract and hold first-rate personnel because it lacks performance-based financial incentives.

This assumption is hard to refute because almost everyone agrees with at least part of it. If good people are detected by scores on standardized tests, the evidence seems clear. Those selecting teaching today are in the bottom third on such tests.

There are at least two easily identifiable reasons. The first is the removal of sex discrimination barriers. A variety of jobs previously closed to women are now open; teaching can no longer rely on the availability of a large captive work force barred from going elsewhere. As bright women frequently opt for careers other than teaching, scores of those entering the field have naturally dropped.

A second and related problem is that teachers' salaries are grossly uncompetitive compared to those of private industry. Statistics about the teaching profession place it at the bottom of the barrel in salary compared to most other occupations (Darling-Hammond, 1984).

For example, the average starting salary for a secondary English teacher is $14,500. Business and industry offer the same beginner a considerably higher salary; new graduates can earn $19,344 in liberal arts fields, or they can go into sales and marketing and expect an average of $19,620 (Northwestern University, 1984). Considering these figures, it is not surprising that so few college graduates select teaching careers. It is unreasonable to expect that very many intelligent people will forgo over $5,000 annually solely for the love of teaching.

The dilemma before school boards, administrators, and teachers' unions is a choice between bringing the floor (base salaries) up for all or setting a higher ceiling available to some, either based on merit or

scarcity. Advocates of the floor approach insist that base salaries for all teachers must improve before any differential salary arrangements will be effectual or acceptable. Advocates of the ceiling approach counter that giving substantial raises to all is unthinkable on grounds that are both financial (who can afford it?) and philosophical (who wants to reward the mediocre?). Supporters of merit pay see their strategy as working with limited resources to attract and retain outstanding personnel who, by definition, have to be in short supply.

Most educators would agree that the base salary must be raised for all teachers in order to keep teaching even modestly competitive with the marketplace. The question usually comes down to how much the raise should be.

Advocates and opponents of merit pay usually part company, though, over the assertion that additional modest incentives will attract able people to come into teaching even if they are presented with much more powerful financial rewards in other occupations. After all, the public sector cannot offer inducements comparable to those that accounting, law, medicine, or business commonly can. It doesn't seem likely that the public will tolerate a bonus of $20,000 or more to keep a good teacher, no matter how impressive his or her classroom performance might be.

Thus there are problems of both the short term (drawing in new teachers) and the long term (keeping experienced teachers) in realistically assessing whether merit pay and career ladders can help to supply an adequate force of certified teachers to staff the nation's classrooms.

The question at issue, really, is the strength exerted by a few more dollars rather than many dollars on decisions to enter teaching, especially among high academic achievers and those who have studied in subject areas critically short of teachers. A second grey area is whether such incentives will retain outstanding teachers. To argue in the positive, one must presuppose that teachers trained in their respective fields exist in abundance or argue that teaching salaries should more closely match those in the private sector. Good teachers are, after all, as responsive to laws of supply and demand as any other personnel.

Public Perception No. 6: Merit pay is linked to raising standards in education.

In the 1980s, we are once again experiencing a period of intense public interest in education; the drive to upgrade standards has become a

passionate issue. Political figures talk of "turning the tide" and "pushing for excellence." This movement has included pressure to enact merit pay programs as one way to stimulate school improvement. Sometimes merit is advanced as a solution in itself that is somehow indicative of quality that did not previously exist in schools. While the notion seems absurd, its presence must be acknowledged.

History of Merit Pay and Career Ladders

Public suspicion regarding the quality of local, state, and national employees is nothing new. The cry for better people in government and public service can be found in some of the earliest texts in China (Drucker, 1978). The search for means to elicit maximum effort from those paid out of public revenues is an ongoing one.

Tinkering with the compensation teachers receive has seemed to many people a promising way to draw extra effort from them. It should be understood by all, however, that the single salary schedule common in America today was not arrived at lightly. At one time, elementary school teachers, who were mostly women, were paid less than high school teachers, who were frequently men. This divisive inequity was finally settled by the single salary schedule that recognized only academic credit and experience; it pointedly disregarded grade level assignment and field of specialty.

The effort required to establish objective grounds for compensation and the positive results of such an evenhanded scale should not be lost on the professional. Besides eliminating sex discrimination in teachers' salaries, the uniform salary schedule muted the annual problem of having to negotiate for increases since it built step increments into the arrangement, and it assured teachers that such raises would not result from favoritism or political finagling, but from the impartial measures of additional experience and training. The single salary schedule was a response to very real problems, and before it is peremptorily swept aside by too-eager reformers, its advantages should be carefully evaluated.

Merit pay, on the other hand, has been tried repeatedly with little success. The first known attempt to establish such a system in the U.S.

occurred in 1908 in Newton, Massachusetts. Since its inception the concept has seen a boom and bust cycle of popularity. Between 1938 and 1958, at least 170 school districts tried to implement merit pay plans. By 1968, 11 percent of all districts with 6,000 or more students indicated they had merit pay. Three states actually passed merit pay legislation (National Education Association, 1984).

Many of the school districts that tried variable compensation programs subsequently abandoned them. Some of the problems leading to the collapse of these endeavors were administrative, such as the reality that allocation of merit pay requires a highly dependable, sensitive, objective, and cost-effective evaluation system; such a fail-safe process has thus far proved elusive.

Other problems were political. The substantial ongoing funding needed to support the programs tended to ebb and flow with political fortunes. Teachers resisted the idea of differential pay, especially in its top-down directive form, and there was a real question of whether programs were actually accomplishing any intended goals; support for the programs accordingly weakened.

Morale problems undercut merit pay efforts, too. Rewarding some teachers, after all, may be viewed by the rest as punitive. Suspicion of favoritism and contempt for the size of merit bonuses were other morale factors contributing to the dismantling of pay incentive programs.

When politicians charge that educators do not want merit pay because they lack the will or ability to implement it, they display an alarming ignorance of the history of this idea. To propose a system that has established such an abysmal record of failure as has merit pay in the public schools, a proponent must be totally ignorant of its past, hopelessly optimistic about its future, or innovative enough in the present to avoid the pratfalls of previous programs. If any idea was ever tried repeatedly with the same results, it is merit pay.

Career ladder programs have a somewhat similar history. In the mid-1960s, the differentiated staffing movement was launched in Temple City, California, a 4,000-student district that tried a four-tiered teacher hierarchy that included senior and master teacher positions. Within the next decade, as many as 50 districts around the country experimented with differentiated staffing (U.S.O.E., 1972). These plans were built on the assumption that all teachers' roles should not be the same and a teacher should be able to advance in education without having to leave the classroom to go into school administration or the private sector. Most differentiated staffing plans were discontinued by the end of the 1970s,

having encountered a host of problems:

—Hasty implementation that resulted in minuscule differences among the various roles in the plans.

—Complicated funding arrangements (such as grandfathering) that resulted in cost overruns.

—Lack of appeal to teachers, who were mostly women who did not wish to relinquish the ground toward equity they had won in the single salary schedule.

—Resistance of the organized teaching profession.

—Lack of continuing federal and state support that would see the innovation through its rough early stages.

—Top-down patterns of implementation that resulted in weak teacher loyalty.

—Abandonment of plans when leadership changed; incoming leaders often did not have the same allegiance to the concept, and without support from teachers, plans collapsed.

—Inability of the models to demonstrate that they contributed to improve learning; hence plans received very little parental support (English and Sharpes, 1972).

While merit pay plans used exemplary performance as a basis for justifying increases for some teachers, almost all the differentiated staffing plans used organizational indexes, such variable levels of responsibility and length of work year, to determine who collected extra pay.

Contemporary Approaches: Some Questions, Some Problems

Even though previous efforts to enact pay incentives have proved disappointing, the concept continues to attract staunch supporters. Of the 46 states that have passed or are designing comprehensive school reform bills, 19 have instituted master teacher, career ladder, or merit pay plans (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1984). Consequently, many ASCD members are now or soon will be participating in or at least reacting to pay incentive programs.

The task force believes that appropriate responses to such initiatives cannot be determined outside of the political, economic, and cultural contexts of particular states or school systems. Consequently, we do not

applaud or decry any specific program, but we do urge that any plan or response to it be based on a careful, thoughtful analysis of local conditions that gave rise to these initiatives in the first place.

Toward that end, we suggest three groups of questions that merit pay or career ladder planners might ask themselves. They are questions about (1) goals and planning, (2) design and implementation, and (3) context.

Questions About Goals and Planning

Merit pay and career ladders have been proposed to resolve any number of problems perceived in education today. When setting goals these schemes may help us reach, it is important to consider:

1. What are the problems to which merit pay and or career ladders are suggested as proposed solutions?
2. Do different constituencies define the problems differently? Whose definition is likely to prevail, and how is the support of dissenting viewpoints manifested?
3. Is there a forum for promoting dialog about the problems to which merit pay and career ladders are proposed solutions?
4. What are the short- and long-term results that the various constituencies concerned with the issue can anticipate?

Assuming that reasonably accurate answers to the above questions can be agreed upon, a second set of questions, having to do with planning (and planning to plan), becomes relevant:

1. How and when should affected groups be involved in problem identification and planning?
2. Are those involved in planning free to redefine the problems and create alternative solutions, or is there a mandate that implicitly impels a course of action or otherwise limits options?

Questions About Design and Implementation

Assuming a decision is made to undertake a merit pay or career ladder program, numerous design questions must be raised. Critical questions of this type are:

1. How will differential pay be allocated? Specifically, will people of the same job description be paid differently based on performance?
2. How will differences in performance be determined and by whom?

Will administrators or peers evaluate teachers? If the evaluation is done by administrators, will their evaluations be evaluated? If so, by whom? What training will administrators need? If peers serve in evaluative roles, what kind of training and support will be necessary for them?

3. If differences in pay are to be related to differences in duties, how will people gain access to higher paying positions? Will there be a quota? If so, how will negative effects be mitigated among those blocked from higher status?
4. Should access to higher paying positions or higher status be based only on performance, or should seniority be factored in somehow?
5. If people can be promoted, can they be demoted?
6. What provisions will need to be made to assure strong and continuous support from school system leadership, teachers' organizations, civic groups, the media, principals, and other involved parties, such as state and federal interests?

Questions About Context and Choices

The local and state context shapes choices and places limits on decisions. Planners must decide whether to (1) accept context constraints and plan within them or (2) alter the context in some fundamental respect. For instance, in some states the building principal is solely responsible for the evaluation of teachers. To develop a merit pay or career ladder plan in such a context, one would need to forgo the option of peer evaluation *or* get the law changed.

Those planning and implementing career ladder and merit pay systems must recognize that such systems of pay and reward run counter to the cultures prevailing in most schools. If efforts are to succeed in instituting new patterns of pay and newly stratified occupational roles, attention to needed changes in the behavior and attitudes of school personnel will be just as critical as those in law and policy. It is also important to comprehend that changes as sweeping as those inherent in merit pay and career ladders require systemwide revisions. If the salary structure is all that changes, the present reform movement will meet the same fate as past plans, having faltered before it began.

Among the more critical contextual questions are:

1. Is a realistic assessment of costs presently available?
2. Are top leaders and community officials willing to commit continuing financial support to the program?

3. If the initiative is coming from the state level, what is the source of funding, and what technical support needs to be provided?

The Sticking Point: Organizing for Excellence

Review of past attempts to implement merit pay and differentiated staffing suggests two reasons why such plans did not work. They were not comprehensive enough, for one thing, to correct all conditions that cripple the drive for excellence in schools, and they accepted too much of the status quo about how schools should function to truly effect significant improvements.

Recent efforts are at least more comprehensive. Present programs in Tennessee, for example, are far broader and more complex than any undertaken in Temple City 20 years ago. Tennessee is aiming for nothing less than total school rejuvenation; the system provides new plans for teacher certification, advancement potential for teachers, aggressive staff development, and overhauled evaluation procedures.

Such systematic change is a necessary but not sufficient condition for school reform success. Management that promotes success is just as crucial. Schools, in our judgment, are not currently managed in ways that promote excellence. A compensation program, which is only one element of the total management system, must be appropriate to and allied with effective management, and any adjustments in compensation will not be fully effective unless faulty management characteristics are also corrected.

A few management characteristics we think discourage excellence are these:

—Schools lack the kind of peer support systems that encourage excellence in other professions and that are independent of compensation systems.

—Elementary and secondary school teachers are expected to *act* like professionals, but they are not *treated* like professionals. As a general rule, they are not involved in meaningful discussions and decisions on matters that directly affect their classroom work, such as curriculum, textbooks, instruction, and grading. This is not the case at the college level.

—There is too little instruction time in schools because of poor school administration, too many interruptions, too much paperwork, and other undesirable features of bureaucratic life.

—Efforts at staff development typically have been one-shot, hit-or-miss attempts that have not been teacher directed or controlled or centrally related to improved teacher or pupil performance.

The way schools are organized to carry out their work discourages collaboration for self-improvement and explains their current political vulnerability. Organizations that do not build in self-directed processes that allow for continuous review and revision of procedures are inflexible and likely to either collapse or, if as crucial to the society as schools are, be changed by extrinsic forces. Dependence on legislative reform has exposed schools to quick-fix fads, changing with administrations, and that has diluted their capacity to engage in the profound change that would foster, and not suppress, top flight performance.

Taking Steps Toward Optimum Productivity in the Schools

Contemporary organizational theorists are engrossed in attempts to delineate factors that separate effective from less effective organizations. Distinctions between the two are usually rooted in how they treat people, their renewable resource. Common recommendations are:

> Treat people as adults. Treat them as partners. Treat them with dignity. Treat them with respect. Treat them . . . as the primary source of productivity gains. These are fundamental lessons from the excellent companies research (Peters and Waterman, 1984).

Establishing Organizational Identity and Meaning

People need to be committed to something to find satisfaction in their lives. If they can find that sense of meaning in their work, the organization to which they are committed has a greatly improved chance to be effective. This theme recurs throughout organizational literature; the phrase used varies with the theorist, but the idea is the same.

William Ouchi (1981), for example, describes effective organizations as clans with a philosophy of management that permeates the structure. Deal and Kennedy (1982) describe organizational cultures that capture the imagination of the people within them, and the authors note that those cultures frequently extend through generations of management. Effective schools literature reports the same phenomenon, variously calling it a sense of mission, a school ethos, shared values and culture, and even a "moral order" (Grant, 1982).

Working the Up Side of Personnel Evaluation

Believing in the value of organizational espirit is easier than incorporating it in schools because few situations are more frustrating to the public, or to most administrators, than the sense that we are paying good money to incompetent, or even below average, teaching personnel. A natural inclination, then, is the impulse to clear out the deadwood—to insist that the substandard get better or get out.

Nevertheless, a human resource development plan that is based on ridding an organization of incompetents is programmed to fail. The time and energy of leaders will be dissipated on the least likely targets for improvement. Organizations that become obsessed with inadequate performance have a tendency to focus on enforcing rules and regulations to ensure minimal standards of productivity. This pattern of rule enforcement does more to undermine the morale of high producers than to affect the behavior of lower strata.

We do not advocate ignoring ineptness, but we do suggest keeping it in perspective. The real challenge of leadership in an organization with a sense of mission lies in discovering what people do well and reinforcing that behavior visibly and regularly. The pleasure of recognition provides motivation to strive for further achievement. Working this "up side" of personnel evaluation means:

—Believing that most people most of the time want to do a good job, and will, given a reasonable opportunity.

—Communicating high, but achievable, expectations for performance, always emphasizing shared commitment to the organization's mission.

—Opening the way for high producers to job and role diversity and promotion.

—Increasing opportunities for frequent positive reinforcement from peers and subordinates.

—Increasing the number of celebrations surrounding good performance. Although most employees will deny the need for such

celebrations of achievement, public recognition of success almost always moves workers to strive for higher levels of self-efficacy and performance.

Developing Staff Capabilities

Beware the superintendent who could accomplish wonders if all the principals could be replaced; or the principal who could create a model school if only the teachers were better; or the teacher who heaps all deficiencies in pupil performance on the students. In the real world of organizational life, leaders don't start over — they work with what they have.

Every study of effective schools emphasizes the role of staff development in achieving organizational effectiveness. Every study of the school improvement process describes the critical role training and technical assistance play in setting up and using new practices. If schools intend to achieve excellence with their existing staffs, they need to create and operate:

— Targeted training programs to assist principals and teachers implementing new programs, techniques, and materials.

— General in-service development opportunities that allow teachers to explore and expand knowledge of their subject fields, of the development of children and youth, and of the past and present practices of education.

— Programs that provide freedom to be away from the school and classroom for training opportunities that are sometimes of short duration (like seminars or workshops) and sometimes longer (like sabbaticals).

— Development centers in which personnel can devise their own teaching materials and methods, with assistance and support for the creation and evaluation of such products.

— Schedules that permit collaborative contact among teachers to counter the isolation that interferes with their teaching, reinforcing, and learning from one another. (Such isolation violates a vital tenet of creating effective organizations: that primary work groups closest to the point of effective action foster the greatest measure of creativity.)

Creating Role Diversity

Professionals anticipate, and have every reason to believe, that as they accumulate experience and build their expertise through experience and

staff development, they will become more valuable in their organizational roles. Education has a special problem in this respect.

Classroom teachers who do not choose to become administrators or counselors will fulfill the same job description the day before retirement as they did on their initial day of employment. That is absurd! Teachers are constantly developing new resources, and the types of responsibilities they assume should reflect their added knowledge. Traditional role structures that provide neither opportunity nor incentive to advance must be changed.

Apart from being blocked from going up, teachers are constrained from growing out; teaching roles are drawn so rigidly that they do not customarily allow teachers to work with children in small groups or individually; consult with parents, other teachers, and administrators; inquire systematically about teaching; create instructional materials; aid other teachers' improvement; write about teaching; or administer special programs and projects. The diversity of teachers' roles in contributing to education in a community should be limited solely by individual teachers' interests and not by adherence to an obsolete job description placing them implacably within the four walls of a classroom.

Involving People

People improve when they are encouraged to participate fully in the policy formulation of an organization. The manager who believes that employees do not want to be involved and usurps their chances to influence decision making, saying, "They just want firm, quick decisions"; or evaluation, saying, "They don't want to get involved in tough decisions"; or planning, saying, "They don't want to waste their time on management" is engaged in elaborate self-delusion. Organizational literature has demonstrated consistently that participatory management relates positively to organizational productivity.

Staff members close to the operating line of an organization are likely to recognize and have solutions for operating problems, hence the utility of a technique such as quality circles. Further, people who solve organizational problems build a sense of commitment to and concern for the organization. If people are invested in decisions, they have a stake in seeing solutions work; conversely, uninvolved people may have a stake in seeing solutions fail. Participatory management patterns—talking to, listening to, and involving people—not only tap the resources of personnel to solve specific problems, but engage their willing cooperation and commitment.

Common Sense and Common Practice

While the forgoing principles of organizational ordering may appear to be common sense, apparently they are not, because they certainly are not reflected in common practice. Perhaps those leaders who fail to create and sustain a sense of institutional mission have traded this more abstract concept for the seemingly defensible specificity of management-by-objectives. Common sense can lead to the conclusion that an organization must divest itself of its poor performers; it can just as easily conclude that positive performance should be emphasized at the expense of whip cracking.

Honest people may reasonably disagree on other elements we suggest would improve schools and teaching. We have endorsed staff development as an irrefutable good worthy of organizational priority, but we recognize that it often loses out in competition for scarce organizational resources. A sabbatical leave program, for instance, is certainly desirable, but can it take precedence over $25,000 needed for instructional supplies? Encouraging the role diversity that is clearly needed conflicts with both the advantages of job specialization and operational simplicity. And common sense can support the worth of a strong, accountable decision-making authority as easily as it can tout the benefits of participatory decision making.

Common sense will not resolve these issues for us, nor will we find answers by denying the conflictual nature of choices we must confront in the process of organizing. These choices represent trade-offs. Educators should search carefully for the options that most appropriately meet local needs and that are supported by hard evidence from studies of effective organizations, particularly effective schools. That evidence argues for:

—The necessity of establishing an organizational identity and sense of commitment.

—The importance of building a personnel evaluation system that emphasizes accomplishment, establishes high but reasonable expectations, and positively reinforces productive people.

—The generative power of a staff development program that allows professional staff to learn, grow, and achieve.

—The positive impact a liberating work environment has when job roles are flexible enough to allow people to experience diversity in their professional lives.

—The vigor organizations achieve when they encourage and support "champions" (Peters and Waterman, 1984).

—The ultimate wisdom of involving people at all levels of the organization in decision making, planning, and evaluation.

These choices are made more difficult because 90 percent of administrators contend that they head the 10 percent of organizations that are already characterized by these enlightened practices. We need, apparently, to look more searchingly and critically for room for improvement in our managerial selves.

In Conclusion

The ASCD task force believes schools can be better than they now are. The current debate about merit pay and career ladders can have a salutary impact on improving schools if educators, board members, and the general public examine more closely the assumptions that are made about schools and the teachers in them. Education, along with the rest of American society, has long since lost its simplicity. Ichabod Crane is dead. With him should go cavalier notions about school improvement. We believe that schools are far more complex than the general public appears to imagine, and that problems in education never yielded to simplistic solutions even when schools weren't so complex.

Any decision to implement a pay incentive program should be an informed choice that recognizes all pertinent local variables and clearly comprehends available options. It is even more important, however, that career ladder and/or merit pay programs be considered in the broader context of human resource development. If problems that now impede teachers' growth as full professional partners remain uncorrected, pay incentives—or any other elements employed to create a higher plateau of teaching excellence—are seeds sown on barren ground.

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